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**WORLD WAR II: EISENHOWER AND CLAUSEWITZ ON THE
WESTERN FRONT**

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2 NOVEMBER 1998

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
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1. REPORT DATE 02 NOV 1998		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 02-11-1998 to 02-11-1998	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE World War II: Eisenhower and Clausewitz on the Western Front				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) National War College, 300 5th Avenue, Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, DC, 20319-6000				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT see report					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 11	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

Introduction

The 1944-1945 land campaign in Western Europe was the largest in American history and offers tactical, operational, and strategic insights which have relevance today. Commanding two million coalition (Allied) soldiers, General Dwight D. Eisenhower effected a strategy that, while successful, continues to generate debate. Rather than selecting a bold, piercing thrust across the Low Countries and Northern Germany to strike at Berlin (as British Commander Bernard Montgomery favored), Eisenhower opted for what has become known as the *broad-front* strategy. This strategy employed two Army Groups, Montgomery and the 21st in the north and General Omar Bradley and the 12th to Montgomery's south, in attacks across the entire western German border (General Jacob Devers and the 6th Army Group would eventually invade southern France and link up with Bradley).

This paper analyzes Eisenhower's leadership and strategy in the framework of Clausewitz, identifying selected principles and their WTO.¹ The intent is not to determine if *broad-front* was the *right* strategy, but rather examine why it was chosen. And finally, relevance to today's military operations will be briefly explored.

Political Objectives and Winning the Peace

Clausewitz tells us that military operations must support the political objectives identified by the head of state. The primary argument made against Eisenhower's *broad-front* strategy is that it was slow and methodical, allowing the Soviets to reach Berlin first and thereby establish post-war political domination over eastern Europe. Had Ike² chosen a rapier-like thrust to Berlin, the argument goes, democracy might have been established in (what became) East Germany and Poland.

¹ WTO: Western Theater of Operations, as World War II in Europe was known.

² Ike: General Eisenhower

If there is fault here, at least some belongs to President Roosevelt. There is no indication that FDR³ effectively communicated to Ike his political objectives in eastern Europe. In fact, it can be argued that FDR gave little credence to post-war Soviet domination of eastern Europe, Churchill's arguments notwithstanding. Perhaps Marshall and Eisenhower should be faulted for not *demanding* a clear delineation of political objectives and what the desired peace would look like (we will see this mistake again twenty years later in Vietnam). In a letter to General Marshall, Ike confesses that "post-armistice matters do not occupy any great share of my thoughts."⁴ We will see that Eisenhower's guidance from the Combined Chiefs of Staff (CCS) was concise and Germany-focused.

Yet after the Yalta Conference, Eisenhower clearly understood that the Soviets would occupy Berlin after the armistice, and this confirmed his reluctance to race toward the German capital. Bradley estimated that it would cost the Allies 100,000 casualties to seize Berlin, "a pretty stiff price to pay for a prestige objective, especially when we've got to fall back and let the other fellow take over."⁵

Eisenhower well knew the political implications of his operational and tactical decisions. He was acutely aware of the necessity to give the British a key role in the ultimate European victory. And almost all of Eisenhower's associates agreed that he was more tolerant of Montgomery than he should have been.⁶ We will discuss Ike's ideas about coalition warfare shortly.

Eisenhower's strategy did support the political objective of unconditional surrender. A mere *defeat* of the German military would have been insufficient, in that

³ FDR, Franklin Delano Roosevelt

⁴ Joseph P. Hobbs, *Dear General* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), 207

⁵ Stephen E. Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 453

any residual military power might have provided the Germans with bargaining strength and resulted in a negotiated settlement. The institutional memory of the Allied experience in WWI would permit no such compromise, the German Army had to be *destroyed*.⁷ This destruction criterion would lead Eisenhower to reject a single thrust across northern Europe, since it would leave significant German forces “surviving” in France and central Germany.

Centers of Gravity

“The hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends” so goes the Clausewitzian definition.⁸ Prior to D-Day, the CCS gave Eisenhower the following directive: “*You will enter the continent of Europe and, in conjunction with the other Allied Nations, undertake operations aimed at the heart of Germany and the destruction of her Armed Forces*.” As Eisenhower described in his memoirs: “This purpose of destroying enemy forces was always our guiding principle, geographical points were considered only in relation to their importance to the enemy in the conduct of his operations or to us as centers of supply and communications in proceeding to the destruction of enemy armies and air forces.”⁹ Clearly, Eisenhower saw the Wehrmacht as Germany’s center of gravity.

As discussed earlier, the *broad-front* strategy gave the greatest chance of completely destroying the German Army. Eisenhower: “We wanted to bring all our strength against him, all of it mobile and all of it contributing directly to the complete annihilation of his field forces.”¹⁰

⁶ Stephen E. Ambrose, *Supreme Commander: The War Years of General Dwight D. Eisenhower* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1970), 533.

⁷ G. E. Patrick Murray, *Eisenhower Versus Montgomery* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996), 6.

⁸ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 595.

⁹ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1948), 225.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 226.

In defining a secondary center of gravity, Eisenhower interpreted the "heart" of Germany as the Ruhr industrial area ¹¹ This led to his double-envelopment strategy of the Ruhr, which could only be supported by the *broad-front*

Eisenhower recognized that one of the Allied centers of gravity was the alliance itself, noting Napoleon's success in fighting coalitions "Nationalism, Eisenhower realized, militated against bold strategy If a supreme commander's strategy caused the loss of several British divisions, or the loss of French territory, then his job would certainly have been in jeopardy, if not the coalition itself "¹² The *broad-front* strategy minimized the risks to the coalition and better protected this Allied center of gravity

Friction and Counter-Friction

The elements of uncertainty, chance, and friction receive considerable discussion in Clausewitz's *On War*, but can be summed in his statement that "everything in war is simple, but the simplest thing is difficult "¹³ He goes on to say that the good general must know friction in order to overcome it whenever possible, and in order not to expect a standard of achievement in his operations which this very friction makes impossible "¹⁴

Eisenhower knew friction, especially weather and selected Allies "The French continue to be difficult I must say that next to the weather, I think they have caused me more trouble in this war than any other single factor They even rank above landing craft "¹⁵ So how does a good general overcome friction? Three methods are flexibility in plans, training, and decentralized decision making

Eisenhower's *broad-front* strategy was no rigid, linear operation, but rather a framework that allowed for opportunistic variation at lower levels Ike could and did

¹¹ Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe*, 225

¹² Murray, *Eisenhower Versus Montgomery*, 55

¹³ Clausewitz, *On War*, 119

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 120

weight Army groups differently in different phases of the operation, by shifting control of the 9th American Army between Montgomery and Bradley. Ike himself described the flexibility inherent in *broad-front*: "If we jam our head up against a concentrated defense at a selected spot, we must be able to go forward elsewhere," by this time, flexibility was Eisenhower's outstanding tactical quality.¹⁶ In response to the Ardennes counterattack in December, Eisenhower demonstrated the flexibility of his plan by rapidly repositioning 250,000 men and 50,000 vehicles into the battle. This operational mobility was an unprecedented achievement in military history, a feat of maneuver unequaled in Vietnam or Desert Storm.¹⁷

With regard to training, Eisenhower's record receives mixed reviews. Although the Americans were unprepared for the hedgerow fighting they would encounter in Normandy, their preparations for D-Day paid enormous benefits. Historian Stephen Ambrose: "In April and early May, assault exercises that amounted to dress rehearsals took place all over England. They included marshaling, embarkation and sailing, approach and assault, setting up the beach organization. The Army got to know the Navy, and vice versa."¹⁸

Decentralized decision-making is critical for the conquest of friction. Consider the converse example: on D-Day, Hitler (the German *head of state*) retained control of the reserve panzer divisions and would not be awakened to deploy them until well after any chance of success had passed. By contrast, American leaders at all levels were empowered to make on-the-spot tactical decisions within the boundaries of the overall operational scheme. On D-Day, friction reigned supreme, as units were disembarked at

¹⁵ Hobbs, *Dear General*, 215

¹⁶ Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers*, 399

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 201

¹⁸ Stephen E. Ambrose, *D-Day* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 138

wrong locations, Allied bombers missed their targets, and paratroopers were scattered across the Cotentin peninsula. However, this friction was defeated by Allied initiative throughout the chain of command. Again, Stephen Ambrose: "The contrast between men like Generals Roosevelt and Cota, Colonels Canham and Otway, Major Howard, Captain Dawson, Lieutenants Spaulding and Winters, in adjusting and reacting to unexpected situations, and their German counterparts could not have been greater. The men of democracy were able to make quick, on-site decisions and act on them, the men fighting for the totalitarian regime were not."¹⁹ Whether Eisenhower deserves credit for this practice of decentralized decision-making is debatable, the correctness of the doctrine is not.

Genius

"Genius consists of a harmonious combination of elements, in which one or the other ability may predominate, but none may be in conflict with the rest."²⁰ "Genius" is not a binary concept, but a spectrum along which we can place military leaders. Whereas Napoleon is certainly high on this spectrum, McClellan arguably resides closer to the bottom. In the WTO, Eisenhower rates up near the top.

One of Clausewitz's elements of genius is the courage to accept responsibility.²¹ Ike had this in spades; consider his pre-invasion press release, written in case of defeat: "Our landings have failed. The troops, the air, and the Navy did all that bravery and devotion to duty could do. If any blame or fault attaches to the attempt it is mine alone."²²

¹⁹ Ibid, 579

²⁰ Clausewitz, *On War*, 100

²¹ Ibid, 101

²² Ambrose, *D-Day*, 190

Intellect and determination are high on Clausewitz's list, "an intellect that, even in the darkest hour, retains some glimmerings of the inner light which leads to truth, and second, the courage to follow this faint light wherever it may lead "²³ The clearest example of Ike's intellect and determination is his reaction to the German counterattack in the Ardennes. At a meeting just after the attack had begun, Eisenhower's commanders and staff were

glum, depressed, (and) embarrassed, as they should have been, given the magnitude of the intelligence failure and the faulty dispositions of their troops in order to maintain hopeless offensive north and south of the Ardennes. Eisenhower walked in, looked disapprovingly at the downcast generals, and boldly declared, 'The present situation is to be regarded as one of opportunity for us and not of disaster. There will be only cheerful faces at this conference table. Eisenhower's decisiveness and Patton's boldness were electrifying. Their mood quickly spread throughout the system "²⁴ Now the Germans were out of their fixed fortifications, out in the open where American artillery, infantry, and fighter-bombers could destroy them "²⁵

Decisiveness, the idea of a rapid and accurate decision also ranks high on Clausewitz's list "²⁶ Stephen Ambrose on the Battle of the Bulge: "Hitler had assumed a slow American response because he was certain it would take Eisenhower two or three days to recognize the extent of the threat and that he would not be willing to call off his offensives north and south of the Ardennes until he had checked with Churchill and Roosevelt. Eisenhower proved him wrong on both points "²⁷

And finally we come to strength of will, that determination to limit the agonies of doubt and the perils of hesitation "²⁸ Debates about strategy aside, the point that stands out is that Eisenhower continued to make the key operational decisions and enforce his will, despite heavy pressure, including frequent personal visits and messages from

²³ Clausewitz, *On War*, 102

²⁴ Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers*, 208

²⁵ Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers*, 200

²⁶ Clausewitz, *On War*, 102

Churchill In the end the greatest support he had, the support that was really decisive, was his own self-confidence²⁹

Current Relevance

Strategic debate notwithstanding, the WTO of WWII should be viewed as an overwhelming operational success in coalition warfare Given today's increasing dependence on alliances (NATO, ad hoc, or otherwise), Americans would do well to consider the lessons of Eisenhower and the Allied victory

Friction in war is reasonably proportional to complexity the more that can go wrong, will Combined arms operations in coalition warfare are inherently complex, and will require inordinate attention to combating friction The three methods identified earlier are proven winners, a few notes on each

Flexibility in Plans Branches and sequels are the Army's doctrinal answers to friction Americans historically do well in this area, as the Soviets would attest ("we study your doctrine, but the problem is you never follow it") We must maintain our guard that political influence does not negate this flexibility, such as could be argued the forward defense of Germany did during the Cold War

Decentralized Decision-Making As international visibility increases (the CNN factor), decentralization comes under attack We must fight this trend Sergeants must be allowed to make sergeant-level decisions Although this doctrine is engrained in the American way of war, we must continually guard against creeping centralization

²⁷ Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers*, 200

²⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, 103

²⁹ Ambrose, *Supreme Commander*, 535

Training Although realistic training is demanded in all units and culminates in the Army's Combat Training Centers, fiscal constraints are degrading current readiness. Diversion of training funds (for installation and quality of life support) has already manifested itself in reduced proficiency and degraded performance at the National Training Center. The Chief of Staff is fighting hard with Congress to halt this trend. Additionally, we must put additional emphasis on *training* flexibility and decentralized, tactical decision-making.

The identification and selection of *genius* for high-level command is an on-going challenge for the American Army. However, one can be sure that the growing discontent and departure of many talented mid-career officers will remove many future-geniuses from the pool of applicants. The Army must take corporate action to retain the best and brightest, perhaps by rewarding performance with pay or by restructuring its officer management. Nurturing genius remains critical, for it is certain that at some time in the future, the nation will look to another Eisenhower for strategic victory.

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